

The Seventh Ecumenical Council

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Held in Nicea, Asia Minor in 787. Under Empress Irene. 367 Bishops were present.

THE ICONOCLAST CONTROVERSY

It centered around the use of icons in the Church and the controversy between the iconoclasts and iconophiles. The Iconoclasts were suspicious of religious art; they demanded that the Church rid itself of such art and that it be destroyed or broken (as the term "iconoclast" implies).

The iconophiles believed that icons served to preserve the doctrinal teachings of the Church; they considered icons to be man's dynamic way of expressing the divine through art and beauty. The Iconoclast controversy was a form of Monophysitism: distrust and downgrading of the human side.

THE COUNCIL'S PROCLAMATION

"We define that the holy icons, whether in colour, mosaic, or some other material, should be exhibited in the holy churches of God, on the sacred vessels and liturgical vestments, on the walls, furnishings, and in houses and along the roads, namely the icons of our Lord God and Saviour Jesus Christ, that of our Lady the Theotokos, those of the venerable angels and those of all saintly people. Whenever these representations are contemplated, they will cause those who look at them to commemorate and love their prototype. We define also that they should be kissed and that they are an object of veneration and honour (timitiki proskynisis), but not of real worship (latreia), which is reserved for Him Who is the subject of our faith and is proper for the divine nature, ... which is in effect transmitted to the prototype; he who venerates the icon, venerates in it the reality for which it stands."

THE TRIUMPH OF ORTHODOXY

An Endemousa (Regional) Synod was called in Constantinople in 843. Under Empress Theodora. The veneration of icons was solemnly proclaimed at the St. Sophia's Cathedral. Monks and clergy came in procession and restored the icons in their rightful place. The day was called "Triumph of Orthodoxy." Since that time, this event is commemorated yearly with a special service on the first Sunday of Lent, the "Sunday of Orthodoxy."

EXTRACTS FROM ST JOHN OF DAMASCUS ON THE DIVINE IMAGES

Things which have already taken place are remembered by means of images, whether for the purpose of inspiring wonder, or honour, or shame, or to encourage those who look upon them to practice good and avoid evil. These images are of two kinds: either they are words written in books, as when God had the law engraved on tablets and desired the lives of holy men to be recorded, or else they are material images, such as the jar of manna, or Aaron's staff, which were to be kept in the ark as a memorial. So when we record events and good deeds of the past, we use images

In former times God, who is without form or body, could never be depicted. But now when God is seen in the flesh conversing with men, I make an image of the God whom I see. I do not worship matter; I worship the Creator of matter who became matter for my sake, who willed to take His abode in matter; who worked out my salvation through matter. Never will I cease honouring the matter which wrought my salvation! I honour it, but not as God. How could God be born out of things which have no existence in themselves? God's body is God because it is joined

to His person by a union which shall never pass away. The divine nature remains the same; the flesh created in time is quickened by a reason endowed soul. Because of this I salute all remaining matter with reverence, because God has filled it with His grace and power. Through it my salvation has come to me. Was not the thrice-happy and thrice blessed wood of the Cross matter? What of the life bearing rock, the holy and life-giving tomb, the fountain of our resurrection, was it not matter? Is not the ink in the most holy Gospel-book matter? Is not the life-giving altar made of matter? From it we receive the bread of life! Are not gold and silver matter? From them we make crosses, patens, chalices! And over and above all these things, is not the Body and Blood of our Lord matter? Either do away with the honour and veneration these things deserve, or accept the tradition of the Church and the veneration of images...

...Just as words edify the ear, so also the image stimulates the eye. What the book is to the literate, the image is to the illiterate. Just as words speak to the ear, so the image speaks to the sight; it brings us understanding. For this reason God ordered the ark to be constructed of wood which would not decay, and to be gilded outside and in, and for the tablets to be placed inside, with Aaron's staff and the golden urn containing the manna, in order to provide a remembrance of the past, and an image of the future.

Who can say that these were not images, heralds sounding from far off? ...Obviously they were not adored for their own sake, but through them the people were led to remember the wonders of old and to worship God, the worker of wonders. They were images serving as memorials; they were not divine, but led to the remembrance of divine power.

Some would say: Make an image of Christ and of His Mother, the Theotokos, and let that be enough. What foolishness! Your own impious words prove that you utterly despise the saints. If you make an image of Christ, and not of the saints, it is evident that you do not forbid images, but refuse to honour the saints. You make images of Christ as one who is glorified, yet you deprive the saints of their rightful glory, and call truth falsehood. The Lord says, I will glorify those who glorify Me (1 Sam. 2:30)...The Scripture calls the saints gods, when it says, God has taken His place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods He holds judgment (Ps. 82:1). St. Gregory interprets these words to mean that God takes His place in the assembly of the saints, determining the glory due to each. The saints during their earthly lives were filled with the Holy Spirit, and when they fulfil their course, His grace continues to abide with their spirits and with their bodies in the tombs, and also with their likenesses and holy images, not by the nature of these things, but by grace and power.

If you speak of pagan abuses, these abuses do not make our veneration of images loathsome. Blame the pagans, who made images into gods! Just because the pagans used them in a foul way, that is no reason to object to our pious practice. Sorcerers and magicians use incantations and the Church prays over catechumens; the former conjure up demons while the Church calls upon God to exorcise the demons. Pagans make images of demons which they address as gods, but we make images of God incarnate, and of His servants and friends, and with them we drive away the demonic hosts....If the Scripture says, The idols of the nations are silver and gold, the work of men's hands (Ps. 135:15), it is not forbidden to bow before inanimate things, or the handiwork of men, but only before those images which are the devil's work.

The holy Basil says: "Both painters of words and painters of pictures illustrate valour in battle; the former by the art of rhetoric; the latter by clever use of the brush, and both encourage everyone to be brave. A spoken account edifies the ear, while a silent picture induces imitation."

What more conspicuous proof do we need that images are the books of the illiterate, the never silent heralds of the honour due the saints, teaching without use of words those who gaze upon them, and sanctifying the sense of sight? Suppose I have few books, or little leisure for reading, but walk into the spiritual hospital--that is to say, a church--with my soul choking from the prickles of thorny thoughts, and thus afflicted I see before me the brilliance of the icon. I am refreshed as if in a verdant meadow, and thus my soul is led to glorify God...

(St. John of Damascus, On the Divine Images, SVS Press, 1980; 107 pp.)

Councils after the Seventh?

The Council of 879-80 under Photios the Great is a great Ecumenical Council, which was convened by the Emperor. The representatives of the then Orthodox Pope were present and everyone accepted its decisions. The Council discussed the two types of ecclesiology, Eastern and Western, and the Eastern ecclesiology prevailed. It also pronounced on the primacy of the Pope and the heresy of the filioque.

There were Councils between 1341 and 1368, particularly the Council of 1351, which was convened by the Emperor in the presence of St Gregory Palamas and ruled that the energy of God is uncreated and that the Light of Christ which shone on Mount Thabor was uncreated. It condemned the heresy of Barlaam and Akindynos that the uncreated essence is identified with uncreated energy, which is known as the 'actus purus', and that God supposedly communicates with creation and man through created energies. So in reality the Council of 1351 condemned scholastic theology, which to a large extent is valid to this day in 'Roman-Catholicism'.

The Council of 1484, with the participation of Patriarchs Simeon of Constantinople, Gregory of Alexandria, Dorotheos of Antioch and Joachim of Jerusalem called itself Ecumenical. It annulled the unifying Council of Ferrara-Florence and issued a Service, composed by Patriarch Simeon of Constantinople, for those returning to the Orthodox Church from the 'the Latin heresies'. Although this Synod established that the Latins should return to the Orthodox Church by means of a written declaration and Chrismation, because at that time the standard 'form of Baptism' still prevailed, the Service composed for the return of Latins to the Orthodox Church clearly refers to the heresy of the Latins, the 'disgraceful and alien doctrines of the Latins', and states that those returning to the Orthodox Church should "avoid completely the assemblies of the Latins in their churches," and anathematized the Filioque which they dared to add.

In this Service there is reference to Latins and to alien dogmas, among which are the familiar filioque, i.e the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son, and the heresy of the 'actus purus', namely, that uncreated energy is identified with the uncreated essence in God and therefore God communicates with the world through created energies.

The Council of 1590, which called itself an 'Ecumenical Council', and its continuation, the Council of 1593 which was characterized as a 'Holy and Great Council' are important. Both are Councils of the Patriarchs of the East, and they decided to assent to the elevation of the Church of Moscow to the honour and dignity of a Patriarchate, which had been previously granted by the Ecumenical Patriarch in 1589 by the relevant Patriarchal Chrysobull or Tome.

The Conciliar decision in 1756 by the three Patriarchs, namely, Cyril of Constantinople, Matthew of Alexandria and Parthenios of Jerusalem, refers to the rebaptism of Westerners who enter into the Orthodox Church.

Although this decision did not last for long, because in practice the Church reverted to the decision of the Council of 1484, it has never been repealed by another Conciliar decision.

It is well-known that the topic of 'Economy in the Orthodox Church', referring to the reception of heretics and schismatics, was on the agenda of the Holy and Great Council, as is clear from the Preparatory Committee meeting in

1971 in Geneva. But ultimately it was removed from the agenda of the Council and the Holy and Great Council has not been given the possibility of ruling officially on this issue. So the question is: why was this issue not included in the agenda of the Holy and Great Council, in order that there might be a discussion with theological arguments on the validity and existence, or the invalidity and non-existence of the Baptism of heretics, which will now be dealt with in an indirect manner?

The Conciliar decision of the Patriarchs of the East in 1848, signed by the Patriarchs of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem with their Synods, calls 'Papism' a heresy, compares it with Arianism and counts the basic Latin non-Orthodox teachings, such as the filioque, the primacy and the infallibility of the Pope, as other false beliefs related to baptism and the sacraments.

The Council of 1872 in Constantinople condemned racialism and nationalism in ecclesiastical life "that is, racial discriminations and nationalistic conflicts, jealousies and dissensions in Christ's Church." Racialism and nationalism are "foreign" to the tradition of the Orthodox Church, a "modernist virus". It is significant that in the epilogue of the Conciliar declaration there is a prayer to our Lord Jesus Christ to keep the Church "immaculate and untouched by any modernist virus, firmly established on the foundations of the Apostles and Prophets."

I have mentioned a few of the 'Ecumenical', 'Holy and Great' Councils - there are others too -that were convened after the Seventh Ecumenical Council and until the nineteenth century, and have been accepted by the consciousness of the Church. Indeed, the decisions of the Great Council of 1351 in the time of St Gregory Palamas have been included in the 'Synodikon of Orthodoxy', which is read on the First Sunday of Lent, and have been introduced into hymns used in worship. This represents the strongest proof that the Council of 1351 has been accepted by the consciousness and judgment of the Church itself as Ecumenical.

One should also mention here the very important three answers by the Ecumenical Patriarch Jeremiah II (1576, 1578, 1581) to the Lutheran theologians of the University of Tübingen. These are remarkable answers sent by Patriarch Jeremiah in cooperation with Orthodox clergy and laity, among them Damascene the Studite, Metropolitan of Nafpaktos and Arta, who is counted among the saints.

Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos of Nafpaktos on this web page: <http://www.pravoslavie.ru/english/94354.htm>